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ABSTRACT

This study aims to determine whether trait categories are generally perceived as more applicable to others than to self. Subjects described themselves and two acquaintances on trait checklists, indicating not only placement on trait continuum but also perceived consistency of trait-related behavior. Positive, negative, and neutral traits were included to assess the role of ego motives. Overall, subjects described others as more consistent than themselves on trait- related behavior. The self-other distinction did not serve to predict relative placement on positive and negative trait continua. Analysis of the relationship between trait ratings and perceived consistency revealed an apparent bias favoring the self but showed even stronger bias favoring a liked acquaintance. (Author/VG)

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Self-Other Differences in Perceived Trait Consistency

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Abstract

Subjects described themselves and two acquaintances on trait checklists, indicating not only placement on trait continuum but also perceived consistency of trait-related behavior. Positive, negative, and neutral traits were included to assess the role of ego motives. Overall, subjects described others as more consistent than themselves on trait-related behavior. The self-other distinction did not serve to predict relative placement on positive and negative trait continua. Analysis of the relationship between trait ratings and perceived consistency revealed an apparent bias favoring the self, but an even stronger bias favoring a liked acquaintance.

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Self-Other Differences in Perceived Trait Consistency

Are trait categories generally perceived as more applicable to others than to the self, or are ego motives decisive in determining which categories shall be applied to whom?

Current research on the non-motivational bases of actor-observer differences in attribution is founded primarily on a theoretical paper by Jones and Nisbett (1972), who argued that "there is a pervasive tendency for actors to attribute their actions to situational requirements, whereas observers tend to attribute the same actions to stable personal dispositions" (p. 80). While Jones and Nisbett offered several reasons for adopting their hypothesis on logical grounds, the rationale which since has received the most empirical support might be termed the "focus-of-attention" explanation. Actors necessarily attend to the situations or environmental cues to which they must respond, while observers are more likely to focus upon the actor's behavior per se. Apparently, actor-observer differences in attribution reflect a more general tendency to attribute events and outcomes to the most salient cause (Kanouse, 1972). Thus, several researchers have been able, not only to demonstrate the predicted differences between actors' and observers' attributions of causality, but also, by manipulating subjects' direction-of-focus, partially to reverse these differences. For example, participants in an interaction who subsequently view a videotape focusing on their own behavior

make less situational attributions for the behavior than participants who do not see such a videotape (Storms, 1973; cf. Duvall & Wicklund, 1972; Regan & Totten, 1975; Taylor & Fiske, 1975).

Despite the recent flood of research on actor-observer differences, a corollary suggested by Jones and Nisbett (1972) has gone largely untested. Jones and Nisbett suggested that the hypothesized actor-observer differences in attribution should lead each individual to perceive all other individuals as having more stable personality traits than does the perceiver. Primary support comes from a single study by Nisbett, Caputo, Legant and Marecek (1973, study III). Each subject described self and four others (father, best friend, new friend, Walter Cronkite) on checklists consisting of twenty bipolar trait pairs. Along with each dichotomous pair, a third choice was offered, i.e., "depends upon the situation." As predicted, subjects selected this situational alternative most often in describing themselves, attributing relatively more traits to each of the designated "Others." In citing this research, Jones and Nisbett (1972) concluded that "Personality traits are things other people have" (p. 92).

A large body of research indicates that personality "traits," defined as observable cross-situational consistencies in behavior, are indeed illusory (see Mischel, 1968). Bem and Allen (1974) have proposed, however, that the failure of trait-predictive approaches lies in the assumption that

all trait categories should be applicable to all people. Instead, two conceptually separate questions need to be asked concerning each person and trait category: first, where does the person typically fall on the trait continuum; and second, how much does the person's trait-related behavior vary from one situation to another? Only where rated variability is low (high consistency), should the predictive power of the trait rating prove high. Bem and Allen were able to demonstrate substantial predictive power across situations from students' self-reports on typical degree of friendliness, but only in the case of those students who had rated themselves above the median on behavioral consistency. Given this degree of viridicality in self-perceptions, it seems appropriate to attempt a replication of the Nisbett et al. (1973) trait labelling study, utilizing the two types of questions employed by Bem and Allen. Reported consistency, rather than placement on the trait continua, will be taken as an indicator of the perceived applicability of trait categories to self and others.

The study here reported will differ from that reported by Nisbett et al. (1973) in another way, by deliberately providing ego biases an opportunity to manifest themselves. While the manifestation of a tendency to attribute more stable dispositions to others than to self under conditions of minimal ego involvement is noteworthy, the phenomenon is considerably reduced in importance if it

operates only in affectively neutral matters, since it may be argued that these are rather rare in social interaction. Furthermore, the intuitively reasonable assumption that the cognitive bias outlined by Jones and Nisbett is widely or significantly modified by ego motives should not go untested, given the failure of so many studies to demonstrate the existence of ego-biased attribution processes (see Miller & Ross, 1975).

The present study, then, will test two hypotheses: 1) In general, persons see trait categories as being more applicable to others than to themselves; i.e., they attribute greater situationally induced variability to themselves than to their acquaintances.

2) In the case of ego-involving attributions, the predicted general effect will be modulated in ego-enhancing and ego-protecting directions, but without completely overriding the general effect: i.e., in the case of negative trait ratings the self should be rated even more variable in relation to others; in the case of positive trait ratings, the self-other difference in variability should be reduced though not necessarily reversed.

Procedure

Twenty-four male and female undergraduates enrolled in an introductory psychology course at the University of Pittsburgh participated in the study in order to obtain required experimental credits.

Each participant completed three parallel questionnaires rating the Self and two acquaintances on 21 personality traits previously scaled according to social desirability (Anderson, 1968). Seven traits were highly positive (5.77 to 6.36 on a seven-point scale), seven were relatively neutral (3.83 to 4.89) and seven were rather negative (2.64 to 3.22).

The questionnaires asked two questions concerning each trait, as suggested by Bem and Allen (1974). The first question in each case required a simple trait rating (e.g., "In general, how BOLD is this person?"). The second concerned the perceived consistency of the trait-related behavior (e.g., "How much does this person vary from one situation to another in how bold he/she is?"). Each question was answered on a seven-point scale ranging from "extremely" to "not at all" in the first case, and from "does not vary at all" to "varies to a great degree" in the second.

Each subject designated the two persons to be described ("Person A" and "Person B"), the only restrictions being that the persons indicated should be individuals with whom the subject was fairly well acquainted and whose personalities the subject judged to be quite different from each other. Subjects then rated Self, A and B in randomly assigned order.

The within-subject design thus employed two independent variables: Valence (Positive, Neutral, Negative) and Role (Self, A, B). It yielded two dependent variables (Trait Rating and Consistency).

Results and Discussion

The anticipated tendency of subjects to designate a close friend first and a relatively less-liked acquaintance second was more pronounced than expected (Table A). On positive traits, Person A received a mean Trait Rating of 5.69 compared to 4.51 for Person B. On negative traits, the ratings were 3.40 for Person A and 3.90 for Person B. Table A further reveals that, overall, subjects actually tended to ascribe traits to themselves, not to a lesser, but to a somewhat greater, degree than to their acquaintances (4.86 vs. 4.61 and 4.24). More importantly, the difference between A and B is greater than that between Self and A, making a simple "self-other" distinction of dubious utility on the Trait Rating measure.

The main hypothesis was that subjects would acknowledge more situational variability in their own trait-related behavior than in that of their acquaintances. This hypothesis was confirmed. Despite their apparent differences in likeability, A and B did not differ overall in Consistency (4.76 vs. 4.69). Self, however, was rated significantly more variable (less consistent) than either acquaintance (3.96, $p < .01$). This overall result is clearly reflected in the means for neutral and negative traits (Table B). The findings for positive traits, though, are less supportive, with the difference between Self and B failing to approach significance. This Role x Valence interaction is significant (Table C), raising the possibility that ego-defensive or ego-enhancing mechanisms may have been employed.

Clearly, ratings on positive (and negative) traits can be either negative or positive, depending upon the scale point selected. Thus, interpretation of the Role x Valence interaction requires examination of the relationship between Trait Ratings and Consistency. This was accomplished by separate binomial regression analyses of the data in each of the nine Role-Valence cells, treating Trait Ratings as the predictor variable and Consistency as the dependent variable.

The two scales should not be expected to be completely independent. It traits are conceptualized as observed consistencies of behavior, it is reasonable to expect Trait Ratings at either extreme to be associated with high Consistency, while Trait Ratings close to the neutral mid-point should be associated with greater variability (low Consistency). Such a relationship would show up as a quadratic effect. This is clearly the case for Neutral traits, no matter who is being described (Table D; Figure A [2]). Furthermore, in the case of the affectively more distant Person B, the quadratic component predominates even for Positive traits. The significant linear component for Person B on Negative traits perhaps indicates a charity effect or a reluctance to describe any friend in stably negative terms; but, even in this case, the quadratic component is larger than the linear component.

Compare to the above the results for Self and Person A. If our analysis of the theoretical quadratic relationship

between variability and trait ratings is correct, the relative size of the linear component may be taken as a rough index of bias. Figure A (1, 3) and Table D reveal the tendency to associate greater Consistency (for Self and A) with higher Trait Ratings on Positive traits and lower Trait Ratings on Negative traits. While the effect is clearly present in the Self-descriptions, note how much more pronounced it is in the case of A, dramatically dwarfing the quadratic component. The term "ego-bias" hardly seems an appropriate term for the observed phenomenon since the image of a good friend is enhanced even more than that of the Self.

In summary, the A vs. B distinction was found in many of the above analyses to be more decisive than the much discussed Self-Other distinction. Affectively, A appears to have more in common with Self than with B. Thus, the clear self-other distinction, and the lack of difference between A and B on Consistency, the variable of primary interest, are the more noteworthy. If perceived consistency of trait-related behavior can be regarded as synonymous with perceived applicability of trait categories, then Jones and Nisbett have concluded correctly that "traits are things other people have."

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Table A

Mean Trait Ratings by Role and Valence

	Self	A	B
Positive	5.55	5.69	4.51
Neutral	5.11	4.75	4.30
Negative	3.92	3.40	3.90
Overall	4.86	4.61	4.24

Table B

Mean Consistency Ratings by Role and Valence

	Self	A	B
Positive	4.29	4.60	4.38
Neutral	3.67	4.55	4.71
Negative	3.92	5.13	4.99
Overall	3.96	4.76	4.69

Table C

Analysis of Variance: Consistency

Source	df	Error Term	F
Role (R)	2	S x R	8.21
Valence (V)	2	S x V	4.10
Traits (within Valence) (T)	18	S x T	3.85
R x V	4	S x R x V	4.81
R x T	36	S x R x T	1.28
S x R	46		
S x V	46		
S x T	414		
S x R x V	92		
S x R x T	828		

Table D

F-values for 2-degree Polynomial by Role and Valence

		Positive	Neutral	Negative
Self	Linear	26.67	3.89	36.94
	Quadratic	23.95	11.61	37.75
Person A	Linear	41.82	1.28	64.70
	Quadratic	4.32	25.08	15.31
Person B	Linear	< 1	< 1	23.36
	Quadratic	41.23	44.22	36.42

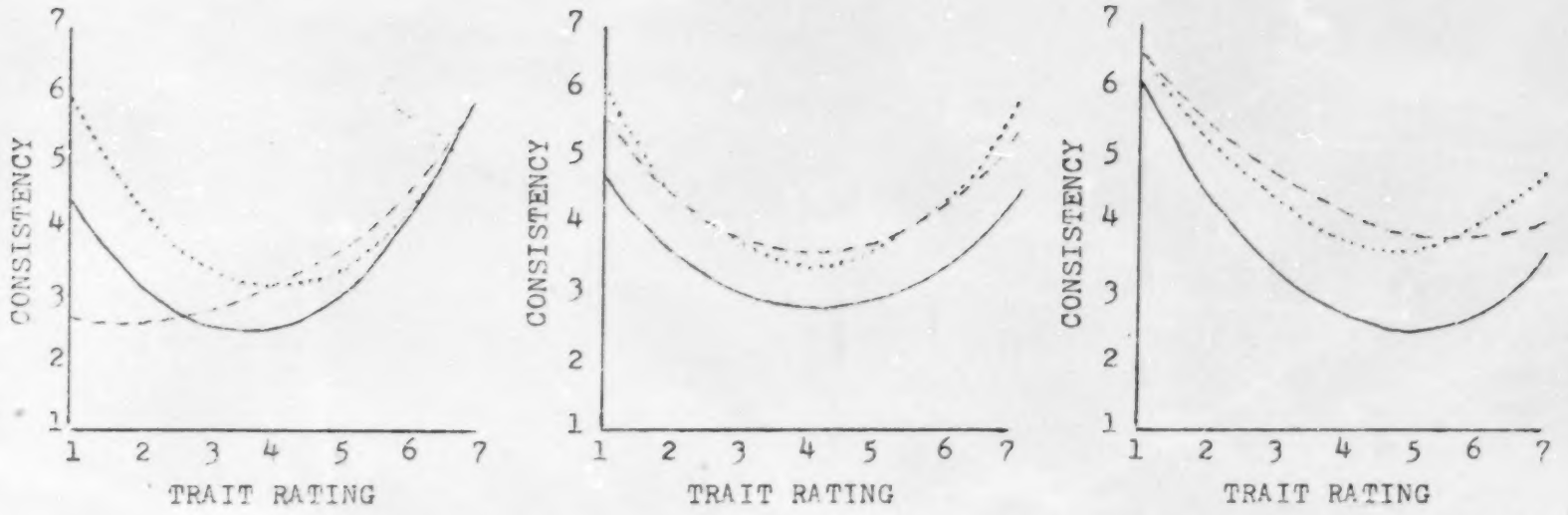

Figure A

Relationship between Trait Ratings and Consistency

by Role and Valence (Binomial Regression)